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Accountability, 'fraternal correction' for bishops

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NCR Today

ROME -- Bishops and other church officials from around the English-speaking world have been meeting in a gathering called "The Anglophone Conference on the Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults" since 1996, comparing notes and trying to identify best practices in fighting child sexual abuse.

This year's gathering is taking place in Rome at the Domus Sanctae Martae, the \$20 million hotel on Vatican grounds where cardinals stay when they gather to elect a pope.

Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide, Australia, who's served since 2006 as President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, is in Rome for the event this week. Over the years, Wilson has carved out a reputation as a "healing bishop" on the abuse scandals, and became the first Australian prelate to address the U.S. bishops when he was asked in 2002 to provide advice as the abuse crisis exploded in America.

Like many bishops, however, Wilson's record has also come in for critical scrutiny. There have been complaints about two cases from his time as a vicar general in an Australian diocese in the 1980s which were allegedly mishandled, though in both instances, Wilson has denied wrongdoing.

Prior to this week's meeting of the Anglophone Conference, Wilson also took part in a four-day summit on the sex abuse crisis hosted by Rome's Jesuit-run Gregorian University and cosponsored by several Vatican offices, titled "Towards Healing and Renewal."

Wilson, 61, sat down for an exclusive interview with NCR this morning on the margins of the Anglophone Conference.

What's on the agenda of this meeting?

tOne of the concerns in the first phase of the meeting was to look at appropriate canonical procedures for dealing with cases of child sexual abuse. That's something that, thanks to the developments at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has become a good part of our work. People now know what the procedures are.

tIn the context of the responses being made in all the different countries, there are processes and decisions that have been made by the bishops' conferences. We need to make sure that all of those are in line with the canonical requirements and so on. That's been really good as a result of the interventions by then-Cardinal [Joseph] Ratzinger and the arrival of Monsignor [Charles] Scicluna [Promoter of Justice in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith]. We've been able to develop a very good working relationship and understanding of what we need to do.

Beyond canonical procedures, what do you hope to accomplish?

tOur concerns are becoming more and more centered on the fact that the church has a big responsibility for the well-being of children generally. We have to look at ways that the church can be well known worldwide for being a good place for children to be. Procedures for safeguarding children are important, and a lot of work's been done on that. In the countries that are part of the Anglophone Conference, there's a lot of emphasis on those procedures. But I'd say that our focus now is moving towards the positive. We have to look at ways that the church, in all the different countries of the world, can provide children with the opportunity to have a happy and good life, to grow towards maturity in a way that's free and full of joy for them.

What did you get out of the summit at the Gregorian?

tOne thing that was clear is that there's a set of principles that apply to everybody, but they need to be applied within the context of every culture. I was very deeply impressed by the speech of Archbishop [Luis Antonio] Tagle of Manila. It was an excellent reflection on the situation in the Philippines and Asia, but it laid out ideas and considerations for people everywhere. What it means to 'look after a child' will be one thing in downtown Chicago, but if you're in Malawi it's something else. That's the great thing about the church. The church is universal, but it's also local.

Didn't Tagle's presentation also confirm that some parts of the church are much more on top of this issue than others? During comments to the press, Tagle admitted that he didn't even know what the laws of the Philippines are on mandatory reporting of child abuse.

tYes, I think that's true. The Anglophone group, for instance, has been very seriously engaged with this over a long period of time. That means we are in a much better position than some other places around the world. The event at the Gregorian was a very important part of trying to make all these other places aware that this work needs to be done.

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For once, to defuse the bomb before it goes off?

tWell, more importantly, because it's the right thing to do. If we've painfully learned lessons because of our circumstances, then let's learn from that and apply it everywhere.

At the summit, we heard Monsignor Scicluna say that the policy of the church is 'full cooperation' with civil authorities, meaning reporting abuse charges to police and prosecutors. Are you one hundred percent convinced that's now the Vatican's settled policy, and that the old debate over

whether cooperation with civil justice infringed on the church's autonomy has been resolved?

I believe what Monsignor Scicluna says. If he says that, then that's it. I think that's true. Once again, those statements are well and good, but it needs to be lived out in the realities of the different places.

But you're convinced the Vatican is on board?

Yes, I am. That's been my experience from the very beginning. Certainly in Australia, our experience is such that we've always been committed to that.

Another issue to surface at the Gregorian is accountability, especially for bishops. The church now has strong anti-abuse policies, but the question is what happens if a bishop or superior doesn't apply them. Do you agree that there needs to be strong accountability for failure to apply these policies?

Yes, I do. I think there has to be accountability for episcopal ministry in every area. It seems to me that in your place as a diocesan bishop, you're not just operating on your own. You have responsibilities to the people you're called to care for, and you have responsibilities to the Holy See as well. The pope has a very strong interest and pastoral responsibility to make sure that bishops are carrying out their ministry correctly.

You would support some sort of canonical sanction for bishops who fail to apply the policies?

I'm not sure what the sanction would be, but there certainly should be some way of calling people to task.

In the court of popular opinion, accountability tends to be a zero/sum game? either a bishop resigns, or nothing happens. Yet because situations are always complicated, there's probably a need for a range of options in between. Do you have any thoughts about what new accountability measures might look like?

You're quite right, when you're looking at the accountability that people have, a lot depends on the gravity and the nature of what they're involved in. The response has to be calibrated against the gravity of the situation. I think it's obvious from what Monsignor Scicluna is saying that it's something we need to do further work on. Bishops generally need to know that they have a responsibility to good governance with regard to their tasks and charges.

There's another element as well, which I think is important. Apart from the law of the church, there is an evangelical counsel about having responsibility for others. As a bishop, if you know that some brother bishop is not doing the correct thing or fulfilling his responsibilities, I think there's a moral responsibility on you to engage that person and to point out to them what they need to do.

You're talking about fraternal correction?

That's right, yes.

That's an important theme in the pope's Lenten message this year.

I did read that, yes. I did notice that, and I did draw the conclusion that it applies to everybody. It's not just something for a person on a playground.

The other thing I'd say is that in Australia, we've already taken this very seriously. The issues

concerning our behavior are guided by the document 'Integrity in Ministry,' which all the bishops and religious have committed themselves to. There are provisions in it for acting if the bishops themselves haven't acted correctly.

When bishops don't act correctly, am I right in thinking that it's usually the bishops who have worked hardest to get things right who are most frustrated?

I think every bishop would be really concerned that the proper response be made to all these things. I think that those of us who have been deeply involved in this area are trying to move forward, and we're very much aware that it's a responsibility laid on the shoulders of all. If there's a breakdown on the part of one, it does have major consequences for everybody. You want to make sure that everybody's convinced that everybody's willing to throw themselves into taking this on and doing it properly.

At least in Australia, are all the bishops convinced?

Oh yes, very much so. The other thing in Australia that's really wonderful is that we've reached a point with all of this that there's also agreement between the bishops and the leaders of religious congregations as well. We have a joint committee for professional standards, that's made up of nominees from both the bishops and the religious. We sit around the table and talk about these issues together, and try to work out the best way to respond to all of these issues - not just about child sexual abuse, but questions of professional integrity in ministry.

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